

Wycombe W. 1, Hitchin T. 0

WYCOMBE WANDERERS took a giant stride nearer the F.A. Cup big-time when a 49th-minute penalty goal from captain John Delaney eased them past the third qualifying round to within just one match of the first round proper.

But, despite a few late scares, their passage was more decisive than the score suggests.

Hitchin manager Vince Burgess gambled blindly on purely defensive tactics with thoughts of a replay obviously in mind. It was never on.

With Viv Busby turning on one of his all too rare class displays before half-time, Wanderers attack, even without cup-tied Keith Searle, boldly answered Burgess' goad, "come and get us".

In fact, they "went and got them" with such furore that it might have been all over by the interval.

Derek Turner, the visitors' much-worked goalkeeper, parried, leaped and dived to save his net.

The home defence punted long high balls into the Hitchin area to keep the pressure on. Yet, Wanderers' biggest "gate" of the season saw him deny Busby a fourth-minute goal, and ten minutes later, tip a magnificent shot from Barry Baker, over the bar following some sharp teamwork with both Busby and Len Worley to the fore.

Sixty seconds on, a low ball from Baker brought danger back into the Hitchin "box", before Brookes stopped Tony Horseman from siding the ball home.

Other than that, however, Baker, an essentially right-footed player, went through 90 hopeless minutes like he had two left feet. His performance was totally out of character for the usually so-reliable midfield worker.

Horseman had desperate luck in the 17th minute when he loosed a penetrating outswinger along the ground, only for a post to deprive him of a goal, and for Hugh Pratt to thankfully give away a corner.

Wycombe returned in the next minute, but after Busby, then Worley, upset the Hitchin back-row with inside crosses, Baker miskicked badly to ease the pressure.

It wasn't until 31 hard, defensively fought minutes that Hitchin won their first corner.

Once gaining a foothold in Wanderers' land, however, they made frequent return trips — late in the period, and what would have been a typical shock goal could have come.

Wycombe 'keeper, Johnny Maskell, whipped the ball off the feet of Paul Giggie, as the young right-winger was about to enter the "box" on a solo run.

The sudden offensive ran into a brick wall, with Delaney's backs checking everything Town had to offer.

But then, only the elusive, and fast-running Giggie made much of an impression, landing Wycombe's experienced left-back Charlie Gale, an exhausting task.

Neither centre — forward, Bernie Cogan, nor former Crook Town and Enfield favourite, Ian Reid, found a route through the Wanderers' defence — and there was always Maskell to ensure 90 more minutes of unbeaten football.

Hitchin's second corner, after 37 minutes, went close to cluding the trap, when Cogan and Hawkins combined to give Baigent a chance to head high by a fraction.

Worley swung wildly at a fast-running, but definitely inviting pass, and shot astray in the next minute. Six minutes later Baker and Busby inter-passing set the latter up for a knife-like run through, spoilt by a too-weak final shot that Turner covered.

Baker may have had a rough game, but, while working in noman's land, Julian Lailey made a precious contribution to the home build-up. Once further upfield however, Lailey also seemed to falter and lose effect.

By the interval, Wanderers were the happier team, yet still needed that one break to ease the tension.

They didn't have to wait long, for four minutes into the new half, Pratt brought down Anthony as he connected with a Baker inside pass in the visitors' area.

Delaney picked his own spot with the penalty kick, which had Turner foiled by 180 degrees, as he went entirely the wrong way.

Now Hitchin had to make the quick switch from defensive

spoilers to attacking progressives, but they weren't quite up to it.

Following up in hopes of a second goal, Wycombe's attack found a clearway from mid-field and met Town's backs on a four to two basis. But Busby, who never managed to reproduce his first-half form, lost possession at a vital moment.

Turner next saw Busby lob unluckily over the bar, before he later had to intervene personally, taking the bounce of a ball off Anthony after Busby crossed out to the edge of the area.

Turner was ultra-lucky in the 70th minute when he unwittingly barged down Worley's forceful shot.

With just one goal advantage for what might have been a sewn-up game, Wanderers weren't allowed the luxury of easing off towards the end.

But, Hitchin like, strangely, so many others seem to do these tactically-minded days, appeared wary of placing full weight on their forward line, until the 12th hour.

And by then, despite Giggie's promptings in disrupting the calm effect around the Wanderers' goalmouth, it was too late.

Wycombe Wanderers: J. Maskell; I. Rundle, C. Gale; K. Stephenson, J. Delaney, J. Lailey; L. Worley, B. Baker, V. Busby, A. Horseman, G. Anthony. Sub.: V. Faulkner (not used).

Hitchin Town: D. Turner; H. Pratt, P. Robinson; M. Howkins, J. Ashworth, B. Baigent; P. Giggie, K. Fulkes, B. Cogan, I. Reid, J. Brookes. Sub.: P. Clarke (not used).